

What I Like to See in a Bible Version for Study Purposes



July 8, 2006

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

July—August 2006

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Introduction

In this brief article I am not giving a detailed evaluation of Bible translations. Rather, I am sketching in broad strokes three issues that are important when choosing a version of the Bible for study purposes.

A Literal Translation

A literal translation is based upon the idea that the purpose of a translation is to let the reader know what the Bible says rather than what the Bible means. Yet many modern readers use meaning-for-meaning versions and paraphrases because they think the meaning of the Bible has been made clear. In reality, it is the meaning of the translators that has been made clear.

Literal translations follow a word-for-word pattern. Normally verbs in the Greek and Hebrew biblical text are translated as verbs in English. This would be true for nouns that are used as the subjects of sentences and other words as well.

Of course, no English translation can always adhere to this pattern and achieve understandable sentences. Sometimes words must be added to make a sentence clear in English. Nevertheless, a literal translation would identify those added words, usually by placing them in italics.

Four major English translations follow these literal principles: (1) the King James Version, (2) the New King James Version, (3) the American Standard Version of 1901 and (4) the New American Standard Bible.

Am I the only one who thinks a literal translation is important? Evidently not, for even non evangelicals see the need for this approach. When the Roman Catholic Church here in the United States decided to revise the New Testament used in their liturgy, they said:

“The primary aim of the revision is to produce a version as accurate and faithful to the meaning of the Greek original as is possible for a translation. The editors have consequently moved in the direction of a formal-equivalence approach to translation, matching the vocabulary, structure, and even word order of the original as closely as possible in the receptor language. Some other contemporary biblical versions have adopted, in varying degrees, a dynamic-equivalence approach, which attempts to respect the individuality of each language by expressing the meaning of the original in a linguistic structure suited to English, even though this may be very different from the corresponding Greek structure. While this approach often results in fresh and brilliant renderings, it has the disadvantages of more or less radically abandoning traditional biblical and liturgical terminology and phraseology, of expanding the text to include what more properly belongs in notes, commentaries, or preaching, and of tending toward paraphrase. A more formal approach seems better suited to the specific purposes intended for this translation.” From the preface of the 1986 revised edition of the New American Bible New Testament.

A Modern English Rendering

In favor of using modern English, it should be noted that the Bible was written in the language of the day. The New Testament, for example, was written in koine, or common Greek. And we do not normally use thee, thou, and ye in our speech today. On the other hand, thee and thou distinguished you in the singular from ye which is you in the plural. Sometimes the correct interpretation of a passage is helped by knowing this difference between the plural or singular use of you. Of the four versions recommended above, only the King James Version and the ASV of 1901 make this distinction. It would not be difficult, however, for a modern English literal version to make this distinction by placing in capital letters you (YOU, YOUR) every time it occurs in the plural, for example.

The Translation “Only-begotten” Referring to the Son of God

It is common in modern English translations to change the meaning of this word from “only-begotten” to “only,” “one and only,” or “unique.” Reasons for the change include the following: (1) “only-begotten” when used of Christ reflects the idea that Jesus Christ is a created being, (2) the genes part of monogenes comes from genos meaning “kind” rather than from the verb gennao which means “to beget,” and (3) Hebrews 11:17 describes Isaac as Abraham’s monogenes son, and “only-begotten” would not accurately represent the relationship of Isaac to Abraham.

I do not agree with the reasons used to reach the conclusion or with the conclusion itself. I believe monogenes should be translated as “only-begotten” for three reasons.

First, the way monogenes is used in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 argues for “only begotten.” This creed states, “And [we believe] in one Lord JESUS CHRIST, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” The revised edition of this Creed in A.D. 381 is even more clear: “And [we believe] in one Lord JESUS CHRIST, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (aeons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” Philip Schaff, the editor and translator adds, “enclosing in brackets the passages which are omitted in the received text” (Creeds of

Christendom, 1:29). Clearly these writers are connecting the idea of monogenes with an eternal relation of the Son to the Father, wherein the Son is of the same substance or essence as the Father.

Second, monogenes occurs nine times in the New Testament. Four of the occurrences do not refer to the relationship of Jesus to God the Father (Luke 7:12; Luke 8:42; Luke 9:38, and Hebrews 11:17), but in each of these four passages, monogenes describes the relationship of parents to biological children. Those who argue that monogenes means “only” or “unique” point to Hebrews 11:17 where Isaac is referred to as Abraham’s monogenes son. They say, “Obviously Isaac was not only-begotten because he had a brother [Ishmael].” I reply, “Yes, but this also means he wasn’t his ‘only’ son, either.” They respond, “So monogenes must mean ‘unique.’” I reply, “Not only ‘unique,’ but ‘unique’ in the sense of being the only begotten son through whom God would keep His promise: ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called’ (Hebrews 11:18).”

Of the remaining five times monogenes is found in the New Testament, the relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father is being described. This relationship demonstrates our Lord’s deity (1) since Christ’s glory reflects His deity rather than His humanity, and this glory is related to his being monogenes (John 1:14); (2) since the concept of the Son as always having been in the bosom of the Father is tied to his being monogenes (John 1:18); (3) since the One Whom the Father sent into the world is described as God’s monogenes Son (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9); and (4) since failure to believe in Christ as monogenes brings immediate condemnation (John 3:18).

The third and final reason for believing that monogenes should be translated “only-begotten” is that, even if genes comes from genos, the family relationship concept may be maintained. Walter Bauer lists four meanings for genos: (1) ancestral stock, descendant, (2) a relatively small group with common ancestry, family, relatives, (3) a relatively large people group, nation, people (4) entities united by common traits, class, kind (Walter Bauer, ed. Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., University of Chicago Press, 2000, 194-95). This family relationship concept can be seen, for example, in Revelation 22:16 where our Lord describes Himself as the “offspring of David.” The word translated “offspring” is genos.

Conclusion

My advice to anyone who asks me about which translation of the Bible is the best for study purposes is to recommend the four mentioned earlier in this article: (1) the King James Version, (2) the New King James Version, (3) the American Standard Version of 1901 and (4) the New American Standard Bible. These four versions are literal translations with a modern English rendering and a correct translation of monogenes as “only-begotten” — three issues that are important when choosing a Bible version for study purposes.